

Double standards in human rights

John Lancaster

WHEN the Chinese authorities arrested an American linguist in China last week, the State Department rushed to his aid.

A consular officer and doctor were dispatched to examine the linguist, Daja Meston, who injured his spine in what Chinese officials described as an escape attempt. Officials in Washington said publicly that Mr. Meston appeared to have broken no laws. A spokesman called for his prompt release.

But Anwar Mohamed, a 27-year-old Palestinian American and gift shop owner from Orlando, Florida, said he received no such courtesies during the 40 days he spent in an Israeli jail last year on suspicion of involvement in terrorism. Despite his claims of torture and other ill treatment at the hands of Israeli jailers he said, US consular officers limited their assistance to providing him with a list of lawyers. No protest was lodged on his behalf.

Mr Mohamed, who grew up in the West Bank town of Silwad, is among many US citizens of Arab descent who accuse the State Department of applying a double standard when it comes to allegations of human rights abuses by Israel. Now they are making their accusations public, holding news conferences and enlisting the help of human rights organizations in an effort to push the department into publicly raising the matter with Israel.

"I'm watching situations where we've had protests over mistreatment of people who are Jewish in the Soviet Union — and these are justifiable protests — and here are American citizens and frankly what you get if anything is the bare minimum of what is required under the law," said James Zogby, president of the Arab-American Institute in Washington.

In cases of Arab Americans who are arrested by the Israeli authorities, U.S. consular officers typically "make an effort to see the person but that's it," Mr. Zogby said. "If this were to happen to a Jewish American visiting an Arab country, you can imagine the bully pulpit, the use of public pressure" to secure his release.

country.

“We make no distinction between the cases of U.S. citizens who are incarcerated in Israel versus how we treat the cases of U.S. citizens incarcerated elsewhere in the world, nor do we treat the cases of Americans of Palestinian origin with any less seriousness than we do Americans of any other background,” said a State Department offi-

cial.

Citing privacy concerns, the official declined to discuss Mr. Mohamed's case or that of other Palestinian Americans who have made similar complaints. He did say, however, that Mr. Mohamed has been asked by the department to outline his allegations in an affidavit that could become the basis of a formal protest to the Israeli government.

Many Palestinian Americans retain residency rights in Gaza and the West Bank, and complaints about harassment by the Israeli authorities—and alleged indifference by the State Department—are hardly a new phenomenon. But such complaints have grown in frequency since the signing of the 1993 Oslo peace accords, which contributed to a surge in travel to Gaza and the West Bank by Palestinian-born Americans.

These travellers often accuse Israeli authorities of singling them out for special humiliation and interrogation at Israeli entry points and border crossings. The most serious allegations, however, involve accusations of beatings and torture by Israeli security forces.

Israeli law sanctions the use of "moderate physical pressure" to obtain a range of information from suspected terrorists.

Israeli officials say, however, that such methods—such as vigorous shaking—do not rise to the level of torture, are subject to strict guidelines, and in any event are eventually only used in extreme cases, as in preventing an imminent bombing.

Mr Mohamed said Israeli police arrested him as he sought to leave the West Bank to visit his sister in neighboring Jordan. At various times during his detention, he said, he was bound so tightly to a chair that he lost all feeling in his hands, had his head covered with a filthy bag and was subjected to incessant loud rock music. He slept in a windowless concrete cell and lost 40 pounds as a result of food deprivation, he said.

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